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Raging Debate over the Desert Raid

Critics ask the Pentagon: Was it too little—or too much?

Three C-130 Hercules transport planes roared low across the Florida panhandle last week, two flying tightly as a pair, one trailing without its partner. This is the traditional "missing buddy" formation of the U.S. Air Force, a symbol of mourning for lost fliers. On the ground, in a green park just inside the gates of Hurlburt Field, some of the toughest men in the armed services could not suppress their tears.

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Meanwhile, investigations were begun by Congress and the Pentagon into what happened during the rescue and why it failed. Carter firmly defended his decision to make the attempt. He reaffirmed his confidence in the Pentagon's plan for the raid as "a fine operation that everyone believed had a good chance for success." And, he argued, using one of the year's more improbable euphemisms, "there is a deeper failure than that of incomplete success, and that is the failure to attempt a worthy effort, a failure to try."

Nonetheless, a worldwide debate was raging over the raid. A Pentagon whose planes had not even been detected while flying into Iran, much less shot at, now was barraged by bombs of criticism. Some were hurled wildly by armchair strategists, others by more knowledgeable experts.

The main target was the rescue plan. Some critics charge that it was too lean and spare, with far too few men and aircraft to overwhelm the militants holding the embassy in crowded Tehran, pick up the hostages and escape safely. On the other hand, other critics argue that the plan was too sophisticated and complex, with too many staging points and too many chances for detection before the assault on the embassy.

Under Phase 1 of the raid, three C-130s carrying some 90 air commandos and three others transporting fuel for helicopters took off from an airfield in Egypt. Eight Sikorsky RH-53 helicopters, flying in pairs, left the nuclear carrier *Nimitz* in the Arabian Sea. All were to meet at "Desert One," an unimproved landing strip in the Great Salt Desert southeast of Tehran.

Phase 2, never carried out, called for the C-130s to fly to Oman and the helicopters to ferry the commandos to a mountain hideout some 100 miles from Tehran. The raiding

party would stay in hiding there throughout the next day. As darkness fell, the men would climb aboard trucks and buses, which would have been supplied by an undisclosed number of CIA agents and U.S. Special Forces men who had entered Iran earlier, some disguised as European businessmen.

The vehicles would slip one by one into Tehran and rendezvous at a warehouse that had been acquired by an American agent. During the night the commandos would divide into two assault teams. A small party would head for the Foreign Ministry building, where U.S. Chargé d'Affaires Bruce Laingen and two other U.S. diplomats were held captive. The other commandos would drive to the embassy compound, where 50 Americans were imprisoned.

Surprise and speed were essential. The attackers, confident that they knew where the hostages were within the compound, planned to scale the embassy walls and shoot or capture the guards. The assault team was armed with automatic weapons but, contrary to some published reports, did not carry disabling gas, which would have knocked out the captives and required them to be carried to safety.

As the assault began, four of the choppers were to fly to the embassy's soccer field. In the last stage of the assault, the hostages (by now joined by the three from the Foreign Ministry) and the 90 commandos would all leave in the four choppers. They would join the C-130s, which would have flown from Oman, at yet another airstrip, "Desert Two." There the choppers would be abandoned, and everyone would fly to safety in the transport planes.

All during the rescue, Navy fighter aircraft from the carriers *Nimitz* and *Coral Sea* would fly along the Iranian border, ready to dart toward Tehran if the assault party got into trouble. The U.S. planners did not fear Iran's once potent air force. Of the country's 76 advanced F-14 fighters, no more than seven can fly, and none can fire its Phoenix missiles, owing to the lack of maintenance. Iran has 187 operational F-4 fighters, 50 of them near Tehran, but none is equipped

for night combat. Moreover, insists a Pentagon official, "we knew where all their planes were," meaning that they could have been destroyed on the ground if that had been deemed necessary.

American military experts not involved in the mission's planning say that whether the scheme was sound depended on what kind of help the rescuers expected once they reached Tehran. The mission commanders, as well as Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman David Jones and Defense Secretary Harold Brown, have refused to comment on speculation that units in the Iranian military or even defectors among the militants who were guarding the embassy were ready to support the operation.

One former U.S. official familiar with Iran finds the mountain hideout scheme more practical than it might sound, noting that there are several well-concealed plateaus in the remote mountains. But few experts can understand the contention of both Carter and Brown that the Tehran phase of the plan would have been easier than getting the assault team into position in the desert in the first place; both of them have refused to explain why they think so. Even some of the military planners concede that the complex mission violated an old Army rule called KISS, meaning "Keep it simple, stupid."

Other questions about the raid and the answers insofar as they were known last week:

Did the plan risk too many lives?

Pentagon officials have adamantly denied reports in Washington of a CIA estimate that 60% of the 53 hostages would probably have been killed in the rescue attempt. But TIME has learned that initial casualty estimates once ran as high as 200 fatalities, including both hostages and rescuers. The final plan did, indeed, envision the possibility of losing from 15 to 20 hostages.

Did the military planners want a bigger force?

Outsiders claiming firsthand information from the Special Forces officers involved in the mission insist that earlier plans called for at least 600 men and 30 helicopters in the assault force. Some of these critics contend that the plan was scaled down by President Carter and his National Security Council in the belief that a smaller strike would prove less bloody, less provocative to Iran's Arab neighbors and more politically acceptable at home.

Indeed, in the Approved For Release 2002/01/03 : CIA-RDP81B00401R000500140002-3 began within days of the seizure of the embassy last November, a wide range of rescue options was considered. "In the initial stages," General Jones said last week, "we did not see an option that had a reasonable chance of success. We tried and we trained and we exercised, and nothing was denied to us by anybody." Some of the earlier plans did envision a larger force but were discarded as impractical. One reason: the bigger the operation, the more difficult it would be to keep secret. So far, there is no evidence that the more restrictive plan was forced on the military by civilian officials.

What changed to make any plan at all seem feasible?

The planners are secretive about this. Yet it seems clear that they had been more successful than expected in getting covert agents into Iran, gaining support from people already in the country and picking up precise intelligence on where the hostages were and how they were guarded. Over the months, the militants had decreased their numbers and vigilance. Also, the U.S. had launched two secret military satellites in late November, completing the Air Force's positioning of six command and communications satellites around the world, including one over the Indian Ocean. The system could send almost instantaneous messages between the Pentagon and rescue commanders in the field. It might even have helped covert agents get information out of Tehran.

What went wrong with the helicopters?

The mission was canceled when three of the eight helicopters heading toward Desert One broke down while flying through a blinding sandstorm. An electrical power supply on one craft overheated and failed, knocking out the gyrocompass, the horizon indicator and the cockpit lights. The crew flew back to the *Nimitz*, making a dangerous landing, with fuel tanks nearly empty.

On the second helicopter, the crew set down in the desert because a warning light signaled that the chopper's 34-ft.-long rotor blade was in danger of failing. They discovered that it was cracked. The crew and all classified material were picked up by another helicopter.

The crew of the third damaged chopper pushed on to Desert One, despite the failure of a pump that propels the craft's back-up hydraulic system. It is essential, supplementing the primary hydraulic system, which operates the helicopter's control. Because the pump could not be repaired, the helicopter had to be taken out of service, and the rescue mission had to be scrubbed. Planners figured that the rescue required at least six helicopters. There were no back-up helicopters on the *Nimitz*; even if there had been, they could not have been flown to Desert One before daylight.

Did the unusually severe storms cause the malfunctions?

Although the sandstorms were common to all three helicopter failures, the mission leaders do not blame their problems on the weather. Pentagon officials disclosed that the choppers' 150-lb. sand screens had been removed to increase the engines' thrust by 3%, a possibly critical safety margin. But the screens are designed only to protect the engines from long-term wear from dirt, which apparently was not a factor in any of the breakdowns.

Investigators suspect that the overheating in the first craft resulted from a cooling vent having been blocked by a crewman's flak jacket and bag. If so, that obviously was human error. The swirling sand, investigators say, could not have cracked the rotor blade in the second craft. The cause may never be known. The failure of the third chopper's pump also is a mystery and presumably could not have been caused by sand because the helicopters' hydraulic systems are well sealed.

Was maintenance of the helicopters faulty?

From President Carter down to mission officers, this suggestion has been vehemently denied. To the contrary, they say, the helicopters got unusually meticulous care, even though their crews did not know of the impending mission. Fifteen maintenance men were assigned to each of the eight helicopters aboard the *Nimitz*. In addition, two civilian helicopter technical experts, including one from Sikorsky, were sent to the carrier. Almost daily, maintenance pilots flew the choppers to make sure that they were in top condition. In fact, the crews tending the RH-53s recently won Navy awards for their exceptional maintenance record. The U.S. military may have a general problem in retaining skilled maintenance men, the mission planners concede, but the best were available on board the *Nimitz*.

Just eleven hours before the start of the mission, a sailor accidentally hit a fire control switch, dousing five of the RH-53s with sea water and foam. The aircraft were rinsed with fresh water and inspected. No visible damage was found.

Why were the helicopters not destroyed at Desert One?

So far, the mission leaders have not provided a satisfactory explanation. Fail-

ure to destroy the choppers enabled Iranian officials to obtain mission maps and other secret papers. Whether the documents revealed the identity of some U.S. agents or collaborators in Tehran is not known but seems improbable. The mission leaders suggested that after one helicopter collided with a parked C-130 at the landing strip and both erupted into flames, the resulting shrapnel and flying debris from exploding ammunition threatened to damage four other C-130s and strand the entire party. When asked about this last week, Colonel Charlie Beckwith, who was in charge of the 90-man assault force, said tersely: "That wasn't my job. I can't talk to that. I got all my stuff out of there." Perhaps protectively, the Navy has not revealed the name of the Marine colonel who commanded the helicopter crews once they left the *Nimitz*.

Did the commandos want to continue the mission?

Friends of Beckwith, 51, a true, if little-publicized, hero of Special Forces missions in Viet Nam, insist that he returned crestfallen from the failure in the desert, angry at being ordered to end the effort and on the verge of resigning his commission. But last week he appeared at a select Pentagon press conference at which photos were banned to protect his potential future usefulness in covert operations. He brusquely denied all allegations that he had opposed the decision to abort.

From the start, Beckwith said, everyone had agreed that if the rescue team could not fly out of Desert One with at least six helicopters, the mission could not go forward. After two of the eight helicopters had failed to reach the landing strip, Beckwith had been relieved at the arrival, although late, of the sixth. But then the pilot of the third damaged chopper told Beckwith that it could not fly. The colonel's one-word reply: "Bullshit."

Beckwith went to the overall on-site commander, Air Force Colonel James Kyle, and asked him to take a look at the ailing chopper. "Let's confirm this," Beckwith said. "I want to make sure." When Kyle climbed down from the critical craft to report that it was indeed useless, Beckwith said last week, his own reaction was immediate: "Sir, my recommendation is that we abort." The commander gave Beckwith a chance to change his mind, asking "Would you consider taking five and going ahead? Think about it before you answer me. You're the guy that's got to shoulder this." After only a few seconds of reconsideration, Beckwith said sadly, "There's just no way."

When a reporter persisted, asking again if Beckwith had not argued in favor of continuing the mission, the rugged six-footer bristled and replied in a soft Southern accent: "With

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all due respect, sir, you don't know where you're coming from. I've been there before, and I'm not about to be a party of half-assed loading on a bunch of aircraft and going up and murdering a bunch of the finest soldiers in the world. I ain't gonna do that. It was a no-win situation."

After the order to abort had been confirmed from both the White House and the Pentagon, Beckwith recalled, his first thought was "My God, I'm gonna fail." He ordered his men into the C-130s to take off, then rushed to gather up all classified papers and gear. He was aboard a C-130 when he looked out of a window. He recalled: "A 130 all of a sudden exploded. It was one hell of a fire. On that 130 were 39 of my people." Beckwith said there was no way to get the bodies out of the fire "unless you wanted to burn up everybody who's going in there." Said the much decorated and fearless officer: "I sat there and cried." ■